

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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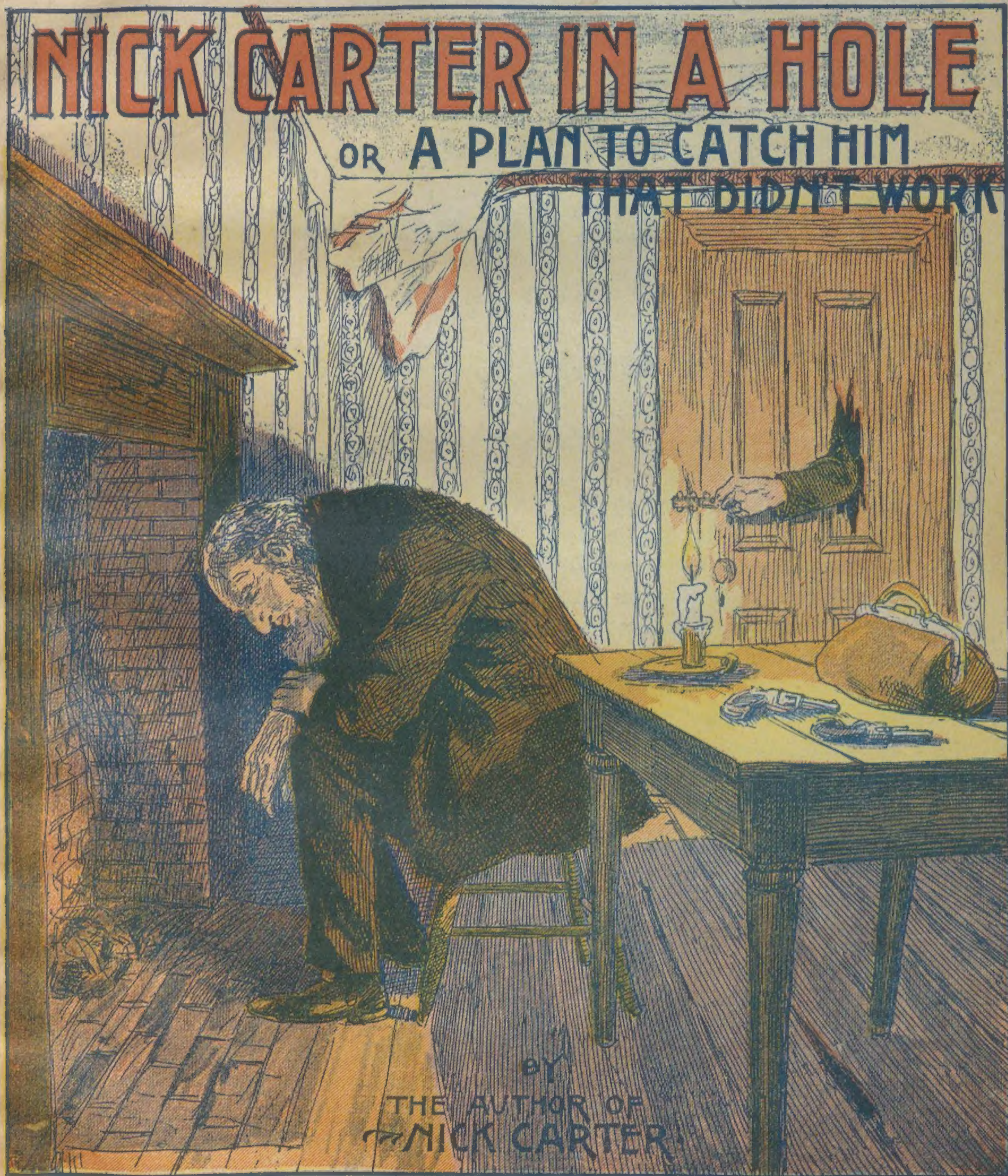
ONE HALF-PENNY

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NICK CARTER IN A HOLE

OR A PLAN TO CATCH HIM

THAT DIDN'T WORK



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER

A HUMAN HAND REACHED NOISELESSLY THROUGH THE BROKEN PANEL.

FOUR NEW NUMBERS 1ST OF EVERY MONTH

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Nick Carter in a Hole

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

BRUNETTE AND BLONDE.

"Wanted?"

"Particularly!"

"By whom?"

"Myself."

"Ah! indeed!"

Nick Carter closed the door which he had just opened.

The person he confronted proceeded to lock it.

Both stood in the private office of the shrewdest lawyer in New York City—Silas Keene.

For thirty years this eminent and active man of law had held his own—head and shoulders above even the reputed giants of the local bar.

As he faced the clever detective now, however, he was as eager and excitable as a young lawyer about to discuss his first brief.

They were excellent friends, these two—this peer of Choate and Webster, and this wonderful secret service expert whose fame was world-wide and deserved.

A look of inquiry rested on the face of the latter, for he had not been invited to seat himself.

The small-sized but big-brained lawyer drew down the door shade in a hurried, fussy way. Then he glanced nervously at his watch.

"Ten!" he said, in a low tone to himself.

"What of it?" interrogated Nick.

"Nearly the hour."

"For what?"

"A double appointment."

"How about this of mine?"

"Luckily you are prompt!"

"I try to be, always—the essence of business, you know."

"I do know—in your case. Listen, Mr. Carter."

"I am all attention."

"You know me pretty well?"

"I am honored in answering yes to that."

"I usually paddle my own canoe?"

"Invariably, I should say."

"Sometimes, however, the shrewdest of us strike a snag."

"Have you?"

"We shall see. Two women are due here within the next ten minutes."

"Both at the same time?"

"Yes, not in the same room."

"I am interested."

"I need your advice—I must have it!"

"Yours to command, you know. It appears to me, however," observed Nick, "that you are letting the precious moments flit by. State your case, Mr. Keene."

"No—you must see; you must watch, study, ponder—direct me."

There came an interrupting tap at the hall door.

Instantly, himself treading on tip-toe, the lawyer pushed his visitor towards an inner door. It stood half open—he drew it wholly so.

Nick, both amused and amazed, allowed himself to be thrust over the threshold.

The door closed—the detective found himself in a narrow closet.

It had once been a connecting hallway of some kind, but its two ends had been sealed up.

Nick was shut in. It appeared that the attorney was bound to be sure of his man, for he had slipped the lock catch.

A voluntary prisoner, Nick inspected his quarters, for there was sufficient light to enable him to do so.

At one side of the closet was an aperture—at the other its counterpart.

One of the apertures looked into the private office and over it was a shutter formed of slanted slats.

Its exact counterpart fronted the other

way, commanding a small apartment that contained the law library of the firm.

From either side, therefore, Nick could look into a room, could hear with equal facility all that was going on. The library was tenantless, although in complete order—with chairs set, with an air of readiness, as if for a visitor.

The private office was of course the first point of interest, for the tap at the door had been repeated.

The lawyer opened this; a clerk stood at the threshold.

Nick had not noticed this man on entering, having slipped by all outposts in the silent, guarded way he usually adopted when he felt that a summons involved "a case."

The man was a stranger to him; he must have recently taken the place of a person Nick had been used to see, on duty, about the office for years past.

The newcomer had fishy, staring eyes—a bad mouth that Nick did not like.

What Nick did like was the direct way in which the fellow stated his business.

"One," he said, briefly.

"One only?" spoke the lawyer, in low but quick accents.

The usher bowed assentingly.

"Show her in here."

"And when the other comes——"

"Show her into the law library, as I directed you."

"I understand, Mr. Keene."

"Close the door upon her; let no one intrude."

The man withdrew. Fifteen seconds went by, the lawyer standing holding the open door expectantly.

A veiled figure crossed the threshold. It was girlish, but steady.

As the veil was hastily drawn aside, Nick saw a dark-featured beauty of the Spanish type. Her eyes were keen, sparkling, audacious.

"Miss Eva Romaine?" murmured the lawyer, bowing with courtly grace.

"Mr. Keene?" responded the visitor, murmuringly, with a graceful inclination of her head.

"I received your card," observed Keene, seating himself in the chair at his desk.

"And my note?"

"Yes, Miss Romaine."

"It surprised you?"

"Why, no, for I was expecting you."

The lawyer fumbled over some papers—he drew out a tiny, delicate note.

"In this you make an appointment," he observed.

"For ten this morning."

"Exactly. Have you brought the document?"

"I have."

"May I glance at it?"

"Most certainly."

The young lady unwrapped a small handbag and drew out a long, yellow envelope.

It bore the name and address of the lawyer.

Mr. Keene fixed his eyes upon his visitor, holding the envelope poised unread for the moment.

"Now, Miss Romaine," he said, briskly, "to the business of the occasion!"

"Yes, sir."

"A few months ago I received a letter from an old client of mine—Mr. Volney Weare."

"My adopted parent—my best friend!" murmured Miss Romaine, feelingly.

"He sent me instructions to dispose of a large amount of property. I did so, realizing something over one hundred thousand dollars."

"A great sum, sir!"

"He stated his intentions; in the pursuit of science he was penetrating the wildest part of Central America."

"Wild, indeed!" murmured Miss Romaine.

"He spoke of his faithful companions;

an old Mexican woman, a deaf mute——"

"Paquita!" breathed the lawyer's handsome client.

"I believe that was the name. There was also his secretary—his literary companion——"

"Myself," unhesitatingly announced the visitor.

"Whom he had adopted. She had faithfully nursed him in his illness; she had been invaluable in his work. He instructed me, in case of his death, that this accumulated fortune should be handed over to her."

"His death was sudden."

"Yes; I had the particulars from the persons who shipped the body."

"He had left us only two weeks——"

"Yourself and this Mexican woman?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Paquita died only a few days later. I alone survived. I came North, because Mr. Weare had so directed me before his death."

"To claim the fortune?"

"To first present my proofs of identity."

"These are the proofs in question?"

"You will find them so, I think."

The lawyer opened the envelope.

From his place of espionage the detective could see that the enclosure removed was a sheet of writing paper, with a photograph pinned or pasted on its centre.

"Yes," nodded Keene—"this is my client's handwriting."

"You recognize it, sir?"

"Perfectly. And this also is the letter—the instructions—he advised me he would send should death overtake him."

"Then——"

"Your address, Miss Romaine?" said the lawyer.

He pushed towards her pencil and paper.

She hesitated, as though she would like to ask some questions.

The lawyer, however, had set his face professionally sphynx-like, and she shrewdly repressed her inclinations.

Miss Romaine scribbled off a quick line.

"You will leave this paper?" intimated the lawyer, indicating the enveloped document.

"Certainly—in such trusted hands as yours."

"Thanks."

Keene arose; he accompanied his visitor to the door.

"And I shall hear from you——" questioned Miss Romaine, rather anxiously.

"To-morrow."

The lawyer bowed his client out into the hall.

At the door he lingered. For he could just hear another door open and shut farther down the suite.

Nick Carter heard it also.

All the detective had to do to begin Chapter Two in the episode of the hour was to turn around in the closet he at present occupied.

A second young woman had just been shown into the library room.

This one was unveiled.

She was quite the reverse of the lawyer's first visitor—a blonde.

CHAPTER II.

NUMBER THREE!

Almost immediately the lawyer entered the apartment into which Nick Carter was now looking.

Its occupant arose.

"Mr. Keene?" she murmured, interrogatively.

"You are Miss Eva Romaine?"

"That is my name."

"You left a card yesterday?"

"Stating that I would call at ten this morning."

"Very true. Resume your seat. You left word that you possessed a document I was expecting from a dead client of mine."

"Yes—Mr. Volney Weare."

"May I see it?"

"Certainly, sir."

The new caller drew from her pocket an envelope.

It was large, like the one just tendered by the lawyer's previous female visitor.

It was the same in color—yellow.

It bore the name and office address of Silas Keene, Esq.

There was a sameness in all this that at once informed the detective why he had been sent for—he even anticipated the lawyer's first words. They were:

"You present this, I infer, on instruction from my client in question?"

"Yes, Mr. Keene."

"You are aware that the case involves considerable money."

"A matter of some hundred thousand dollars, which Mr. Weare informed me you had in trust."

"And which you expect me to turn over to you?"

"Yes."

The lawyer bowed, reflected.

"Mr. Weare wrote me of his adopted daughter and her older companion," he at length recommenced.

"The Mexican nurse, Paquita, you mean."

"I think that was the name."

"Dead."

"Indeed!"

As he spoke the lawyer opened the unsealed envelope.

Like its counterpart, this document was a written page with a photograph in its centre.

There was a monotony about the situation that appeared to make the lawyer impatient; he hurried affairs.

"Miss Romaine," he said—unruffled to exterior view—"you will kindly leave this document."

The young lady bowed.

"Willingly."

"Give me your address."

"I will note it on this card."

"That will do very well."

"And I shall call——"

"No—I will send you word."

"When, may I ask?"

"To-morrow."

"Thank you, sir."

The last comer arose, left the room; in a minute or two the lawyer followed her.

He gave way to his pent-up emotions as he rushed into his own private apartment.

Locking the hall door after him, he hurriedly opened that concealing the detective.

"Come out!" he cried.

"Excited?" insinuated Nick, with a cool smile.

"Bamboozled! Sit down, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed the lawyer. "What do you think of that?"

He flung the first document received on the desk before Nick.

"And that!"

Its apparent counterpart followed.

They were different in only one point, Nick observed, as he picked them up and deliberately scanned them.

The same face did not exist in both photographs.

"Permit me a moment's study," remarked the detective.

The body of the documents were identical—the same words, apparently the same handwriting.

Written around a ruled-off square was a direction to the lawyer.

It told him to pay over on demand the money he held in trust "to my faithful daughter, secretary and fellow explorer—Miss Eva Romaine!"

"Whose picture is appended," preceded the signature of the dead testator.

In each document the photograph was pinned to the paper sheet.

"Well, well?" urged the lawyer, on nettles of irritation and suspense.

"What do you want?"

"A decision."

"I am not a Solomon!"

"But you are Nick Carter!"

"Did you ever know Nick Carter to blindly commit himself?"

"Ah—no!"

"Nor shall I do so at present," leisurely proclaimed the detective. "Bring me the papers in this case."

The lawyer had the same at hand—two letters from the deceased.

Nick looked them over. He compared their handwriting with that of one and then the other of the sheets just delivered.

"His handwriting?" questioned Keene.

"It is a question—that."

"Now, Mr. Carter, what am I to believe?"

"How do your ideas incline?"

"One is the real Eva Romaine."

"You think so."

"Which?"

"Mere guesswork to attempt to answer that, just now. The addresses."

Nick took possession of these. With disappointment and disquiet, the lawyer watched the entire batch of documentary evidence disappear within his visitor's pocket.

"What next?" he demanded.

"Why, next," said Nick, "lend me your clerk."

"My clerk?"

"The usher, the new man I see you have here."

"The old one is home, sick."

"Where did you get this new specimen?"

"He dropped in incidentally."

"Well, I wish to send him on an errand."

"Concerning this affair?"

"Certainly."

"You will take it up?"

"At once."

It was Nick's intention to dispatch a directing and explanatory note to Ida, his little lady detective at home headquarters.

He had penciled half a line, when the lawyer, who had left the room, returned.

He was followed, not by the man who had disposed of the two recent callers, but by a boy.

"Will this one answer?" asked Keene.

"Yes—but the other?"

"He has strangely absented himself without permission."

"I see."

Nick finished his note and dispatched it.

"I shall have to wait for a while," he observed.

"All right, Mr. Carter. And now, what do you think?"

"Why, it is simple," declared Nick. "You certainly share my opinion—somebody is attempting a fraud."

"Some one is trying to palm off a fictitious heiress. Which of the two is the real one?"

Nick refused to commit himself.

"We have till to-morrow to find out."

"If—if the addresses are all right."

"Ida will soon settle that question."

"You have sent for Ida?"

"Yes. You are wanted, it seems."

"That annoying new fellow!" ejaculated the lawyer, much perturbed—"nobody on hand to attend to callers."

A visitor was announced by a tap at the door.

The lawyer petulantly unlocked and opened it.

"Well?" he said.

Nick glanced past him. He caught a glimpse of a feminine form ere Keene

closed the door with a slam and the words:

"No—too busy!"

"Another female?" inquired Nick.

"Yes—some canvasser or peddler. The annoyance!"

"Bound to come in!"

"Now, what do you want?" irritably demanded the lawyer, in response to another knock, and reopening the door.

There was no reply, but this time the latest caller pressed forcibly past the lawyer.

He was a small man, and she was quite a heavily-built woman.

She had a strange but simple face, very dark, and in her apparel suggested the gipsy.

On one arm she bore a half basket, half reticule, formed of closely woven grasses, and to the lawyer this had given her the semblance of a peddler.

There was a placid dignity about her that attracted Nick, and he scanned her closely.

Keene was much wrought up; he stamped his foot at the unconventional entrance.

"The brass! the assurance!" he stormed.

"Hold on," said Nick—"this is no peddler."

"Why doesn't she speak?"

"I am pretty sure she does not know how."

"What?"

Nick's glance had taken in a patient, set expression about the lips that was enlightening.

"She is evidently dumb."

"Charity racket, eh?"

"Not at all."

Nick had arisen and waved his hand graciously to the woman.

Her eyes went the rounds of the room. She walked over to where a large calendar hung from a hook.

It was evident that she could not read,

but she began fingering the square spaces in which the numbers were set.

This she did with the deftness reminding of an expert accountant annotating, or a skilled musician playing some instrument.

Speedily her quick fingers ran the card till the index digit finally rested on a date.

She had counted off twenty-one squares.

"The twenty-first of the month, eh?" remarked Nick.

"That is to-day," observed the lawyer, half interested.

The woman proceeded to a corner where a duster hung.

She bunched the feathery end, and lifted the slim, long handle, pointer-like.

There was a large clock on the wall.

Running the handle across the glass face, she began traversing the dial space as she had covered the calendar sheet.

She paused at the figure "ten," looked at Nick, looked at the lawyer, replaced the duster in its original resting-place, and sat down.

The sensitive-nerved attorney was on nettles.

"What's this hocus-pocus?"

"Wait," said Nick, almost solemnly.

"There is a mystery here."

"Nonsense!"

"About to be unfolded."

The woman suddenly attracted the attention of both in a marked degree.

She scanned Nick sharply, and then the lawyer. The inspection evidently surprised her as to the habitual occupant of the office.

Advancing to the lawyer, she opened her basket, and drew from it an envelope.

It was long and yellow.

Opening the envelope, she drew out a thrice-folded sheet of paper.

It was covered with writing—but in its centre was a photograph.

The lawyer gave a start, and looked sharply at it.

His hands went excitedly to his head as though his senses were suddenly sent reeling.

"Three!" he positively shouted. "Mr. Carter, here's another one!"

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER "WAITS."

The lawyer's case was turning out to be a complicated, but a decidedly interesting, affair.

The reiteration, the sameness, would have been farcical to a person not gifted with Nick Carter's foresight and intuition.

To the skilled expert it was serious, promising, dramatic.

"I'm bewildered!" breathed the lawyer.

"I hope not," instantly remarked Nick—"no need of losing your head. We have simply another claimant. This is the Mexican woman."

"Paquita?"

"Yes."

"Dead!"

"Oh, no! alive—very much alive!"

The lawyer rubbed his head in a confused way.

"I am not used to such sensations," he declared.

"Let me look at document number three," suggested Nick.

The woman seemed perfectly willing to allow the lawyer to take this.

He did so, and handed it to Nick. For several minutes Nick sat at the table, inspecting it, comparing it with the others and the Weare letters.

The woman had gone over to the remotest corner of the room.

There she seated herself. She smiled in a simple, trustful way at the lawyer.

She again opened her strange basket. From it she had drawn a knitting outfit.

She plied her needles deftly among a mass of fine woolen strands.

"Why! this is becoming positively weird!" commented the lawyer.

"Why so?" interrogated Nick, completing his inspection.

"Look at her!"

"I see."

"Planted!"

"With a purpose."

"Eh?"

Nick advanced to the woman and tendered the envelope.

He was making a test—it succeeded.

She pointed to the lawyer—implying entire ease and confidence.

She pointed also at the calendar and the clock in succession.

"That simplifies affairs," announced Nick.

"Does it?" debated the lawyer, dubiously.

"Certainly. This person is the Mexican woman, Paquita."

"You said that before."

"I reiterate it more positively. She is waiting for somebody."

"Whom she expected to meet here?"

"At ten—on the twenty-first."

"This hour."

"And to-day."

"Well?"

"Perhaps that person is delayed, and may yet come."

"Still another!"

"Yes."

"Who—this time?"

"The owner of that paper, and—if you will allow me a bold guess—the real claimant."

"The genuine Eva Romaine!"

"Beyond doubt. For the others are impostors."

"We can't be positive, Mr. Carter!"

"We can—those other two are proven impostors."

"Proven?"

"Shall I show you?"

"Please do so."

"By stating two facts. First, both of them falsified as to the death of this person, Paquita. Again, the letters you received from Mr. Weare were written at a distance from civilization."

"What of that?"

"In a climate where ink becomes muddy and dries up very quickly."

"Did you note that?"

"It is my business to note such things."

"True, but—clever!"

"Oh! no—quite commonplace. This last screed, of all the three, most resembles in ink marks the fluid the original writer employed. In fact, it looks to me as though, driven to straits, Weare had manufactured his own nutgall and other chemicals."

"He was able to do it."

"A scientist—doubtlessly. But, more than that, his last sheeted letter was pinned together."

"I remember it."

"The photographs on all three of the various sheets brought in here so strangely during the past hour are pinned on."

"What do you make of that?"

"This: That the pin in the Weare letter is a silvered pin that had lain in among sulphur for some time—probably in a medicine chest."

The lawyer, pretty knowing himself, stared in profound admiration at Nick Carter—still more knowing.

"Aha!" he interjected.

"Examine the pin holding this last photograph——"

"And you find?"

"It is discolored similar to the one in the letter."

"And the other two?"

"Plain, untarnished."

"A point?"

"I think so. Weare's pin, and this last pin, came from the same place."

"Then what have we to do?"

"Wait."

"If this woman could speak!"

"I am satisfied she is dumb."

"Or hear!"

"She has not caught a sound since we have been talking," declared Nick, with a scrutinizing glance at the simple, open face of the last visitor.

"She expects her young mistress," murmured the lawyer.

"Her picture shows a being of quite a different stamp from either the blonde or brunette."

"She is very pretty and intellectual looking. Now, those other two——" began the lawyer.

"Well, Mr. Keene?"

"They are, of course, not working together."

"What? Spoil what might have been a successful imposition but for this last complication? Ah, no!"

"But how did two persons come to get onto the matter so clearly, so identically?"

"I cannot answer that—yet."

"And the triple appearance here, at the same hour?"

"We shall soon fathom this."

"With the coming of Ida?"

"Initially—yes."

The lawyer sat down, silently thoughtful for some moments.

Nick blocked out the programme ahead; one of its features was the introduction of a Mexican he knew, in case the original of the last photograph presented should not appear.

Nick Carter did not believe that she would appear.

There had been a miss, a hitch, with the two feminine impostors, as affecting themselves—and likewise a blunder concerning this Mexican woman and her young mistress.

Nick was still awaiting Ida's arrival, when the hour hand of the clock on the wall moved past the eleven numeral.

The woman observed it, glanced cal-

culatingly where the sunlight came in across the floor in a broad stream.

She arose calmly, put away her knitting, and took up the duster once more.

She counted off three more spaces on the dial.

"She is going away," announced Nick.

"But we must not allow it!"

"On the contrary," said Nick—"by all means! She has indicated that she will return at two o'clock."

"With the expectation of finding her young mistress here?"

"Undeniably."

"She seems to feel perfectly easy in her mind."

"That is because she has no idea of the plot that must exist against the real Miss Eva Romaine."

"With such a plot there must be rare wickedness!"

"Naturally."

"This woman may fall in with enemies?"

"So much the better."

"How?"

"I shall be on hand to learn who they are."

"Ah! I see what you are getting at, Mr. Carter—you are going to follow this woman?"

"To see where she is stopping—that will furnish additional enlightenment as to her past movements. Again, I have a plan to see if, with the assistance of a Mexican I know, she cannot be made 'to talk.'"

"To talk!"

"To express herself."

"I see."

The woman was, therefore, allowed to leave the room without hindrance or any manifestation of unusual concern on the part of Nick and the lawyer.

She bowed pleasantly to them, and passed through the office doorway.

Nick started to follow, as the receding

footsteps echoed a safe distance down the hall.

He paused at the door to briefly announce his intentions to the lawyer.

As he got ready to overtake the departing visitor, Ida came flitting from the suite entry.

She advanced towards Nick as he made a gesture—her arrival swiftly modified the detective's plans.

"The woman who just left here, Ida——" explained Nick.

"What—with a basket?"

"The same."

"Why, something has happened to her," reported Ida, very quickly.

"Something has happened to her?"

"Yes—just as I reached the door."

"What?"

"Fainted, possibly—she fell. There is a little crowd about her—you can see for yourself."

Nick hurriedly followed Ida to the outer hall.

On the landing of the street staircase a group hovered over a huddled form on the floor.

It was the woman Nick had intended to shadow, and she lay outstretched and silent, like one dead. Paquita was not dead, but she was terribly hurt.

When Nick came to investigate the source of her injury, some rather grave suggestions stirred his mind.

The affair had resolved itself into the tragic in a marked and sudden way.

When the woman was about half way down the stairs a heavy piece of wood had fallen upon her.

It had struck her head with stunning force, and she had gone down like a clod.

This timber was an eight-by-eight beam, about five feet long, and weighing not less than seventy pounds.

There was only one way that it could have fallen upon her—it had been purposely dropped.

It had descended from the floor direct-

ly above, and it must have been lifted over the railing of the balustrade.

The timber was a piece used to brace the cables across a hall window whenever a safe was lifted or lowered.

A surgeon, hastily summoned, pronounced the woman to be suffering from severe concussion of the brain.

Leaving Ida to accompany her to a hospital, Nick made these initial discoveries.

He followed them up by endeavoring to trace the miscreant who had committed the murderous act.

Ida had come up by a side street entrance, and had not witnessed the disaster.

On the floor above, Nick could find nobody who had observed a strange lurker, or any person acting suspiciously at the period of the crime.

The incident seriously disrupted the detective's plans for the time being.

When Ida returned to report the woman in the hands of persons who understood how to safely guard "a Nick Carter patient," the detective at once gave her the addresses of the lawyer's two first female callers of the morning.

They were at quite widely distant points. Nick appointed the hour of three for a report at the lawyer's office.

Keene, despite his rare legal acumen, was a nervous, excitable man.

The episode of the day had much disturbed the even tenor of his way.

The more so was he aroused, when at three o'clock that afternoon Nick re-appeared to interview him with an air of manifest gravity.

"What have you learned?" the lawyer at once interrogated.

"Your new clerk has not yet returned?" asked Nick.

"Not he? Vexatious! Everything seems going to the dogs!"

"Nor have I been able to find him."

"What is that?"

"And his record," proceeded Nick in the same serious tone, "is quite as shady and unsatisfactory."

"You have been looking for Purnell!"

"I have been looking for Purnell."

"That was why you asked so many questions about him this morning?"

"Was it not natural that I should?"

"His dropping away in this fashion gives probability to the suspicion that he is not all right."

"I consider him extremely wrong," observed Nick. "You have been deceived in this man—he came into your employment with a purpose."

"You don't mean in connection with this bewildering Weare case?"

"I do not know that, but in some way he has got in touch with one or both of the female impostors, and I should not be surprised if the accident to your latest caller, the Mexican woman, was brought about by this villain's hands."

"You amaze—you appal me!"

The little lady detective appeared at that moment.

Her report was brief—as discouraging as brief, in fact.

She had visited each address in turn that Nick had given to her.

One of the persons for whom she inquired had been at home at eight o'clock, and the other at eleven o'clock.

With singular unanimity of purpose and apparent motive, at precisely noon each had informed the landlady in charge of the establishment where she roomed that she was about to leave the city.

Not the slightest trace of them could be found after they had left their last boarding places.

They had appeared strangely—they had departed abruptly, mysteriously, and effectually.

At the hospital, in a precarious condition, lay the Mexican woman, critically ill.

The temporary clerk of the Keene

office had vanished like a stone in the water, a bird in the air.

The original of the last photograph presented to the lawyer did not put in an appearance.

The Weare affair became a dense, apparently unfathomable, mystery.

One, two, three days passed by—no trace, no development.

The baffling Weare case slumbered.

But only slumbered!

CHAPTER IV.

"DISAGREED!"

Nick Carter had been especially summoned to the office of Silas Keene the morning when the Weare case came to the front.

He had been almost a daily visitor to the place for some three weeks preceding, however.

The detective and the lawyer—as has been stated—were close acquaintances.

Nick, besides, was transacting just now an important matter of business with the attorney.

The business was this:

The detective had been compelled to carry one of his hardest-fought cases beyond the usual culmination.

That is, he had tracked and caged Schwarz, the notorious New York firebug and life insurance swindler, to find the battle resumed in the higher courts of justice.

From his first arraignment before a police magistrate, Schwarz, alias "the Count Rudolf Volmar," had disputed every inch of the way to the doors of Sing Sing.

Behind this man were brains, capital, the secret co-operation of one of the most dangerous confederations of crime that had ever existed in New York City.

Every possible delay was encompassed, every legal technicality that could favor the prisoner was taken advantage of.

Nick was determined to "land" this man.

His associates, members of a ring that had played the fire, life and burglar insurance frauds to the most audacious limit, were out on bail.

In the building Schwarz had burned, an old janitor had been suffocated by the smoke.

The charge of murder was added to arson and swindling; therefore Schwarz had been refused bail.

The trial came on, and Nick had privately secured the co-operation of Lawyer Keene.

He did this to be certain that by no quirk or quibble could the defense put the regular prosecuting officials off their guard.

On the fourth day after the events that had heralded the materialization of the Weare mystery all the evidence was in on the Schwarz case.

Nick was perfectly satisfied with the way in which it had been conducted.

He had left court at eleven o'clock, while the judge was giving his closing instructions to the jury.

There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that Schwarz would be awarded the extreme penalty of the law.

With time now for exclusive attention to other matters, Nick naturally bent his steps toward the office of Silas Keene.

Chick, his assistant, was to follow him there after attending to some necessary matters in the court where the trial had taken place.

Nick found the lawyer engaged. He was soon at leisure, upon becoming advised of the detective's presence in the waiting room.

"The Schwarz case, Mr. Carter?" he intimated, as a preliminary query.

"Practially closed."

"In the hands of the jury?"

"Yes—two hours since."

"The fellow is sure of the full penalty."

"I think there is no doubt on that point."

Keene rubbed his thin hands together with entire satisfaction.

"We have beaten them on every application for bail," he observed.

"Which meant freedom for the prisoner, for he would have 'jumped.'"

"Oh, certainly! And we have prevented his tricky lawyers tripping or trapping us. It is as good as settled. I wish, Mr. Carter," resumed the lawyer, with an anxious glance—"I wish we could say as much for that other exasperating affair!"

"The Weare case?"

"Of course."

"We shall—soon. I am now ready to devote my full time to that matter. Ah! that is the tap of my assistant, Chick."

Nick could recognize a hand touch, once familiarized, as readily as a human voice.

Chick it was, and he was requested to enter, which he did rather hurriedly.

"I didn't wait to telephone," he explained.

"Where was the need? Something up?" questioned Keene.

"Yes."

"Wrong?"

"Oh, decidedly!"

"With——"

"The Schwarz case."

"What is that, Chick?" challenged the detective, hastily arising to his feet.

"The jury have disagreed."

"Disagreed!" exclaimed the lawyer.

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"The jury came into court, after a stormy discussion of the evidence, with the positive announcement that an agreement was out of the question."

"Mr. Carter! what does this mean?" questioned the lawyer, turning excitedly to Nick.

"The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I tell?"

"But—you intend to know!"

"Oh, yes. We will have to postpone —"

"That other matter."

"Temporarily."

"It is too bad!"

"Come, Chick."

The detective led his professional associate from the room.

"How did the jury stand?" inquired Nick.

"Eleven to one."

"Ah! and the dissenter—did you find out who he was?"

"I made that my urgent business at once, of course."

"Who was it?"

"You remember 'the sick juror?'"

"So called—in fact."

"His name is David Trent."

"Yes, I remember the name and the man."

"Well, that is the person who hung the jury."

Nick was extremely astonished.

He had scanned the jury narrowly. There had not been a bad or unworthy face among the twelve.

Particularly had the person Chick named met the detective's idea of complete fitness for honest jury service.

"You are sure of this man, are you, Chick?"

"Positive. The others, when they were discharged, made no concealment of the identity of their dissenting member. Further, they indulged in some pretty lively comments on his unexpected and unwarranted course in the matter."

"Fixed, eh?"

"I see no other way to construe it. Though, what they gain——"

"A new trial."

"We shall be on hand just the same!"

"Yes, Chick; but delay in the crim-

inal's reprieve. Perhaps you have not got this David Trent's address handy?"

"Yes, I have."

"Give it to me."

"I secured all points at once—I knew you would insist upon investigating the matter."

"Certainly—that must be done."

"I have kept comparatively close track of the jurors, day by day," explained Chick. "You intimated that the defense was sparing no money or pains to get Schwarz free."

"You discovered nothing suspicious, Chick?"

"Nor underhanded. The officer in charge is incorruptible. I am satisfied that no one has approached the jury since the trial began."

"Then this David Trent either is a man planted at the start——"

"Or an obstinate, unevenly balanced eccentric!"

"I incline to the former theory."

"You must be right. Still, the man's record does not favor the assumption."

"What is his record, Chick?"

"He is an honest, industrious mechanic, with pleasant family relations. You know he has been designated as 'the sick juror?'"

"Yes."

"He had a bad swelling on his face several days ago. It became so large and painful that the officer in charge of the jury has been obliged to take him three mornings in succession to have it lanced."

Nick recalled all this; "the sick juror," with his bandaged head, had been a conspicuous feature of the jury box the last day or two.

"Perhaps his discomfort made him captious," pursued Chick. "At all events, as soon as the jury was discharged Trent, usually jovial, moodily departed for home."

"Had he expressed any opinion on the

merits of the case prior to the final decision?" inquired the detective.

"Forcibly so."

"How did he incline?"

"To a life sentence for manslaughter."

"And he voted for a discharge this morning?"

"Insistently."

"We will have to look into this matter."

A conveyance took the two professionals back to the court.

Chick had burrowed very thoroughly into jury box secrets, but Nick wished to prosecute a few necessary investigations personally.

He saw the judge, who expressed his unbounded surprise at the verdict.

No new application for bail had been made, and he assured Nick that he should resist the same, if advanced.

"We shall press for an immediate new trial," said Nick.

"The sooner the better, Mr. Carter. I am satisfied that this Schwarz has a powerful influence backing his interests, and that the jury was tampered with."

The jurors had been given their pay warrants, as Nick ascertained from the court clerk.

Quite incidentally, that officer chanced to be at work on the record book, as Nick asked him a few casual questions.

Nick observed the signature, "David Trent"—on the opposite page it previously occurred.

This first signature appeared in the original jury roll.

Nick merely scanned first one and then the other signature, but it was a thorough scrutiny.

He rejoined Chick.

"We must follow this matter up without delay," observed Nick in a tone that convinced his shrewd, observing associate that he was urged by some discovery.

"Found out something additional here?"

"Why, yes, Chick," answered the detective. "I have found two widely dissimilar signatures in the name of this David Trent."

CHAPTER V.

THE "FIXED" JUROR.

Within half an hour the two detectives reached the home of the dissenting juror.

Trent could not have preceded them long, for when Nick rang the doorbell the woman who answered it announced in response to his first question that "David had just returned."

She was his wife, as her joyous face indicated.

"It is some one to see you, David," she said, unceremoniously ushering Nick and Chick into a little sitting room.

"The sick juror" was rather moodily and stupidly regarding a prattling youngster on his knee.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, his eyes brightening.

He scanned Nick, then Chick; his glance fell.

"Go on with your work, Mary," he said to the woman, and she went out, with a curious look, closing the door behind her.

Nick uninvited took a seat; Chick took possession of a second chair.

David Trent looked uneasy. He made an elaborate feint at playing with the child, but soon rather irritably put it down on the floor.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded, sharply, breaking a spell of complete silence.

"Why should there be trouble?" asked Nick.

"Well, what are you after?"

"You know who I am?" questioned Nick.

"Certainly!"

"And my friend?"

"Yes, of course; I heard your testimony, both of you, didn't I?"

"Which did not strike you as very convincing, it seems?" intimated Nick.

Trent fidgeted and scowled.

"Well, that's as may be!" he muttered. "It's over and done, and that's the end of it."

"True, my man," retorted Nick—"over and done, as you say, but not the end of it."

"Eh?"

"Trent," asked Nick, "have you anything to say to me?"

"The sick juror" evaded the searching eyes of his questioner.

"Why, what should I have to say?" he demanded.

"You gave your verdict on this Schwarz matter in accordance with a clear conscience, did you?" pressed Nick.

"I tell you that's over and past! I served—the matter is settled. My face is torturing me, and I'm not well! If you come here to bally-rag me——"

"Why, no, Trent. I simply come to give you a chance."

"A chance for what?"

"To show up as the honest man we presumed you to be."

"Who says I'm not honest?" flared Trent.

Nick did not reply.

"I'm honest, and poor—too poor to be hauled away from a steady job to be cooped up for three weeks at a paltry two dollars a day!"

"Poor, are you, Trent?" said Nick, softly. "Why, no!"

"Eh!"

"Yours?"

"Where did you get that?"

"Yours, I asked?"

"Yes—it's mine!"

"Prove property, then!"

A stimulating episode had intervened.

Chick felt that Nick Carter had done a fine thing.

The little child, set down on the floor, had proceeded to amuse itself.

Playing with the ring of a work table drawer, it pulled this open.

Something flat, green and fresh had fallen out.

The child began to pound this little package with its chubby fists.

Nick had deftly leaned over, picked up the package, at a glance discerned its value, and propounded the questions that had manifestly discomposed Trent.

The latter put out his hand.

"Here," he said, gruffly, "you're pretty bold, it appears to me!"

"This thousand dollars——"

"How do you know it's a thousand dollars?"

"So marked on the band—this thousand dollars is a pretty good sum for a poor man, Trent!"

"Mind your own affairs."

"This is my affair."

"And that is my money."

"And I say—prove property!"

"I don't have to!"

"Yes, you do."

Nick thrust the money package into an inside pocket; then he buttoned up his coat.

Trent had sprang to his feet, and with clenched hand glared into Nick's eyes.

"Better keep your seat, Trent," advised Nick, coolly, resuming his own.

"This is too much!" stormed Trent.

"It is a good deal—for a poor man!"

"I mean your highhanded interference!"

"I mean your underhanded thousand dollars!"

"Underhanded?"

"Did you come by it honestly?"

"Yes!"

"It is not the price of your verdict in the Schwarz case?"

"No!"

"You did not vote for his acquittal in consideration of——"

"Stop right there!"

A change had come into Trent's face, and he extended his arm in an impressive gesture to enforce silence.

"Very well—what for?"

"I didn't vote for acquittal."

"Oh, yes—it was you."

"I didn't vote at all."

"That's all romance, Trent!"

"For I wasn't present at the court when the verdict was given."

"You were not present?"

"No, sir! You have surprised me, caught me before I could make up my mind what was right and what was wrong; I'd finally have come out right, though."

"What are you talking about?"

"That thousand dollars."

"Well?"

"Keep it."

"I intend to."

"I wouldn't touch a cent of it, and I'm glad you came to hurry my determination."

Nick discerned that in a roundabout but earnest manner Trent was working for a definite point.

Trent went to the door.

"Mary!" he called.

"Yes, David," said his wife appearing.

"Bring me a pail of cold water."

"A pail of——"

"And a coarse towel."

"Why! David——"

"Do as I say."

Nick did not interfere, though Chick regarded Trent as an irresponsible being.

"The sick juror" plunged his head into the bucket, brought it out dripping, and gave it a fierce rubbing.

"Now, then, gentlemen!" he said, facing the detectives fresh and briskly, "I am awake once more!"

"Have you been asleep?" inquired Nick.

"I guess I have!"

"Explain."

"That thousand dollars is not the price of my verdict."

"You said so."

"For I gave no verdict."

"That, also."

"My statement is true."

"Where did you get the money, then?"

"I found it."

"You found it, eh?"

"Most assuredly."

"Where?"

"Practically in my pocket."

"When?"

"About court time this morning."

"In court?"

"No; I tell you I wasn't near the court nor the jury room this morning."

"The man is telling the truth," whispered Nick, to his assistant.

Then, aloud:

"I see you have something to tell, Trent?"

"Indeed, I have!"

"Tell it!"

"Provided you will repeat it to the judge?"

"I shall do so."

"And hand him that thousand dollars."

"Something interesting is coming!" murmured Chick.

"Yes," nodded Nick.

The detective fixed a scrutinizing eye on Trent's face, which now glowed with its usual honest energy.

Trent had, indeed, "woke up"—he moved about and gesticulated with the upheaval of exciting thoughts.

"You see," he prefaced, "there's been dirty work done!"

"With you the victim?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Tell us all about it, Trent," invited Nick, encouragingly.

"I will!"

CHAPTER VI.

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

David Trent began his story.

It was about as unique and extravagant a recital as any one Nick Carter had ever listened to.

"To state the case clearly," Trent began, "we were twelve honest fellows in that jury box."

"I should doubt my powers of discernment if it turned out otherwise."

"Myself included."

"Of course."

"Last Monday morning the officer took me out of court to meet a man."

"Who was he?"

"I never saw him before. He had declared to the officer that my wife sent him—important business."

"Did he make it patent to you?"

"Why, yes—in a way."

"What was?"

"I carry a little life insurance. I was behind in the payments. He asked me when I could catch up. All the time the officer listened—that was all."

"It does not appear much."

"It was the start of everything."

"Proceed."

"As the man was about to go away, he laughed at my extra growth of beard. Hey, officer!" said he, playfully rubbing his hand over my jaw, 'I'll stand a dime to get this fellow shaved!'"

"He rubbed his hand over your face, did he?" observed Nick.

"Quite roughly—though, I fancied, in fun."

"Which side of your face?" pressed Nick.

"This, of course!" answered Trent, putting his hand to the poultice that had won him the designation of "the sick juror."

"Why, yes, I see—of course!" nodded Nick.

"You understand," observed Trent, "that he fixed my face there and then?"

"I so understand, now, that you have let light in on the incident."

"That's just what he did. He never came from my wife. Nor even from the insurance company."

"You found that out?"

"My wife has told me enough to convince me on both points."

"Then he simply visited you to 'fix' you, as you term it?"

"And he did just that! Next day that swelling appeared on my face. The next it grew so large and painful that the officer had to take me to a surgeon."

Nick nodded assentingly; he was aware of all this.

"For three mornings right before court time the officer took me over to the surgeon's office. The surgeon said it was some mystifying kind of blood poisoning, and had better be attended to right away."

"I see."

"He lanced it each day, until this morning."

"And not this morning?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't see him."

"How was that?"

"Here was the way: The officer and I would enter the reception room of the surgeon's suite. I would pass into the consultation room. Then a few minutes in the operating room. My face would get fixed up, and we would return to court."

"Yes, I understand," said Nick.

"Now, this morning, as I left the officer and entered the consultation room, a young man approached me."

"Where did he come from?"

"Through a doorway letting out into the hall."

"Who was he?"

"I supposed an attache of the surgeon's office."

"Had you seen him before?"

"No, but he bowed friendly like, and said: 'The doctor will attend to you in his private room across the hall this morning, Mr. Trent.'"

"You took that in?"

"Why not? He had the entree. He was bareheaded—looked like a doctor himself, and—yes, I followed him."

"Across the hall?"

"Direct."

"Into a room that was not the surgeon's private office?"

"Not at all. I didn't have an opportunity to realize that, though."

"Why not?"

"The minute I got across the threshold my conductor turned, gave me a swing, slammed the door, and I was flung straight into the arms of two men waiting for me."

"What did they do?"

"Applied a drenched cloth to my face."

"Chloroform?"

"I guess that!"

"And then?"

"I remembered nothing further."

"When you awoke—"

"I was lying on my back on the bare floor of an unfurnished room."

"Alone?"

"Perfectly alone. As I got up, something tumbled off my chest."

"That package of money, I infer?"

"Yes, and a note."

"Where is the note?"

"I must have dropped it—left it behind. I was dizzy, confused, scared."

"What was the note?"

"A single line."

"And it said?"

"'Best to keep mum and enjoy your thousand dollars.'"

"Go ahead."

"I half-realized what had been done—I had heard of kidnapping witnesses, jurymen, and all that before."

"What did you do?"

"I left the room."

"Its door was locked?"

"Yes, but it was no trick at all to force it. I came down on the street. Two hours—ten, I couldn't of myself tell how long I had been in that state."

"Did you go to the court?"

"I drifted to its neighborhood."

"Proceed."

"I saw a boy who had just left the building. I stood in a doorway and hailed him. He was in a lawyer's office, I guess, for he promptly answered me when I asked him if the Schwarz case was finished."

"He said yes?"

"And told me of the verdict."

"What then?"

"I came home."

"With your thousand dollars?"

"Not mine—yours, the judge's. I tell you, I wouldn't have kept it a second once I got my brain steadied!"

"I believe you in that," said Nick.

"Have you mentioned this to your wife?"

"Not yet."

"Defer it."

"What? Smother up this rascally outrage!" exclaimed Trent, indignantly.

"Ostensibly accept your bribe, yes."

"Why—well, you say that?"

"I say it."

"You, Mr. Nick Carter—so, I guess I understand. You intend to ferret out this hocus-pocus?"

"To the last bottom fact."

"Then—give your orders."

Nick explained that by assuming a passive acceptance of conditions the cul-

prit might be thrown off his guard. At least, he would not be warned and aroused.

With Chick the detective proceeded to traverse all necessary ground that might give additional particulars.

When they met an hour afterwards both had considerable to offer, much to suggest.

"I visited the room near the surgeon's," declared Nick.

"To find—nobody?"

"And nothing, except the crumpled written line about 'keeping mum,'" narrated Nick. "The scheme was simple, clean-cut, effective. Schwarz's backers had one last hope—to hang the jury. Fearing they could not corrupt, they risked a high-handed venture."

"I can imagine it all," remarked Chick.

"The man who visited Trent poisoned his face. They watched their chance—he and his accomplices."

"Friends, backers of Schwarz?"

"Of course. His bandaged face made an imposition easy. The surgeon states that his jury patient did not appear to-day. The false Trent simply slipped back across the hall and joined the officer."

"As though the real Trent, with his face fixed."

"That is it. At the court no one suspected that it was other than Trent in evidence."

"Trent's descriptions of his caller and his decoy are alike vague, unsatisfactory," suggested Chick.

"Ah, no guide at all. You see, Chick, this is not an ordinary jury fixing case. The ultimate aim is to liberate Schwarz. Having secured a disagreement, before another trial comes around these friends of the firebug and swindler aim to leave things so arranged that a conviction will be absolutely impossible."

"The fellows have covered up their tracks all right."

"But are bound to break out afresh I am confident," asserted the experienced detective, "that the jury-fixing act is only section one of a daring and important criminal scheme."

About the time that Chick brought the startling news of the jury disagreement to

Nick Carter, at the office of Silas Keene, the lawyer, a man bounded from a carriage down a narrow, crooked street near the East River, in whom the detective twain would have been immensely interested had they caught a sight of him there and then.

To all appearance and seeming, this man was David Trent, "the sick juror."

He was, in fact, his "double."

The fellow had the clothing, the bandaged head, the general form and outlines of the chloroformed mechanic.

The carriage resumed its course; its late passenger threaded a tortuous maze of by-street and passage ways.

Finally he reached one of those sinister buildings that are common in thickly-settled, criminal-infested localities.

It was a rear house, having no street frontage whatever, and was shut in and sheltered by solid rows, describing the boundary of a square.

The man unlocked a door, ascended a staircase, then another, unlocked a second door at the top of the house, and entered a room reeking with tobacco smoke.

"Ah! back?" exclaimed its sole occupant.

He rose from four chairs serving as a lounging place, where he had been lying stretched out.

"Yes, and I have had a derved close shave!" answered the intruder, grimly.

"Yet you did it?"

"But wouldn't try it the second time! The risk was too great."

The newcomer tore off his face coverings.

There came to light a visage with unusually strong features—suggestive of the keen business man, and yet of the exponent of tragedy on the mimic stage as well.

The other approached, his face indicating satisfaction and curiosity.

"Merckle, you're a trump!" he declared, enthusiastically.

"Give me a drink!" spoke the newcomer hurriedly.

"You're drenched and shaking all over!"

"It was a hot ordeal, Purnell!"

"Yet they never suspected?"

"No one suspected. Yet the strain has been terrific. Think! if I was found out, if they learned who I am?"

"But—you successfully enacted your part."

"And it is my last appearance in any such role. But for the fact that Schwarz is my sister's husband, that a dozen deals hang on his liberty, I would not have stirred a step personally."

The man addressed as Purnell was the missing clerk from the law office for whom Nick Carter and his assistants had been looking so diligently.

He helped his comrade to the contents of a black bottle, all the time regarding him with undisguised admiration.

When the one had resumed his normal nerve, and the other had got over his excitement, the man addressed as Merckle said:

"Now, then—to business, sharp and close!"

"All right," nodded the other.

"We have accomplished that which we started out to do."

"Yes," assented Purnell, "I played the lawyer's clerk, and I kept you and your friends posted."

"It helped. We have gained Schwarz a respite."

"Which is something."

"Which is everything!"

"You see that ahead, do you?"

"Clear as crystal!"

"Despite Nick Carter?"

"Despite Nick Carter—he was the rock in the road."

"But now shoved aside?"

"No—only burrowed under."

"Still there, then?"

"Yes, curse him! still there." Into the eyes of Merckle there came a baleful, vindictive expression. "But that is my affair!" he observed, grimly, and with terseness. "Now I shall leave you. I am going home; I relapse once more into the staid, respectable burgher. My work is practically done."

"Done?"

"Or will be, before I leave New York," stated Merckle. "You can finish up what little remains."

"Little?"

"I said it."

"With Nick Carter in active evidence?"

Merckle shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry for Nick Carter!" he said—quite ironically. "But he is dangerous. There is an end that must be gained."

Let those standing in the way look out for themselves. You see," he continued, after a long pause, "Nick Carter's reputation hangs on convicting Schwarz."

"Yes."

"He is working on the mystery of the girl also."

"You mean 'the girls.'"

"As you put it."

"I stumbled across that affair in my capacity as lawyer's clerk."

"You handled it neatly."

"And played into your hands."

"As a matter of fact, yes. It's a big case—we expect it to net a hundred thousand dollars. In the meanwhile the Schwarz case sleeps, and in time Schwarz will stand another trial."

"I can't see what you gain. The same witnesses——"

"Not all the same witnesses!" pronounced Merckle, incisively.

"Ah! not all—that is your scheme?"

"I have the best reasons for believing that the next trial will not result in a disagreement."

"But a dismissal?"

"I guarantee it. This will be—say, a month from now. While the Schwarz case is pending, the Eva Romaine case for a side diversion."

"You control the strings in that affair."

"Every one of them."

"At your home."

"Beyond the city's din, unsuspected."

"There are three girls. You cannot play all three?"

"No—only one."

"Which one?"

"That depends."

"And this Mexican woman, Paquita—you tell me she is dying at the hospital."

"Well, even if she recovers, she is as good as dead for all our intents and purposes."

"She could not speak before——"

"She will not even be able to think, hereafter!"

"Then the board is clear for us to lay our plans for this Weare fortune in any way we choose?"

"The course would be clear were it not for Nick Carter."

Merckle scowled impatiently.

"Again Nick Carter!" he muttered between his set teeth. "The one important witness in the Schwarz case, the cog

wheel in the Weare matter! Let Nick Carter have a care of himself!"

"He has outlived all threats, Merckle."

"I am not a threatening man. Once aroused, I strike direct for dead centre."

"Are you going to do so now?"

"I am. Paper! pens! ink!"

Purnell regarded his companion fixedly. Merckle had called for writing materials as would an executioner, for the death warrant.

He bared a wrist, his face set in a pose of unusual and menacing composure, yet determination.

When Purnell brought a pad of writing paper, with pens and ink, he scrawled a few hasty lines.

These he signed, with a quick dash of the pen. It was not a name, however—it was a mark. In fact, it was a series of marks, all connected, yet whirled into the enclosure of a circle that resembled a coiled serpent.

"Purnell," said Merckle, "how many in New York City remember my old sign manual?"

"Ha! of the old days—when that mark on a bursted safe door nettled the police, when its appearance in boozing ken and fence rallied the best of the profession? Fifty at the least, all choice spirits, ready to jump at your call—to the last one of them!"

"Despite my five years of retirement from the profession, they would take my word?"

"As gold!"

"Very well—I have written."

"And I?"

"Copy or show, as you like—only use care in informing only those who are true blue and clear grit."

"Trust me for that! What is it?"

"A proclamation.—Read it."

It was a "Reward"—a reward, "for Nick Carter—dead or alive!"

And the sum offered was ten thousand dollars.

CHAPTER VII.

"PLAYING" NICK CARTER.

About a week after the halt in the Schwarz case, Nick Carter received a message from the chief of the secret service.

It was couched in language that indicated at once to Nick that he might expect a request regarding some new criminal matter.

This was not at all to the veteran detective's fancy.

The secret service expert had never yet abandoned a case.

A problem of mystery, intrigue or crime, which had come within his province, and continued unsolved and abandoned was yet to be.

Things were at a standstill in the matter of Schwarz & Co.

The baffling Weare matter was yet a shrouded affair.

No trace had been gained of the men who had fixed the jury.

Schwarz, secretive, sarcastic, smoked, read and chatted in his cell with a complacency that told of defiance and hope commingled.

Concerning the mystifying Eva Romaine complication, things were dark, dubious and stationary.

The blonde and brunette had left no trace behind them.

She whom far-seeing Nick Carter had decided to be the real claimant had not come to the surface.

The fraudulent lawyer's clerk seemed no longer in the land of the living.

At the hospital, the Mexican woman, Paquita, lingered on—and that was all—with a fractured skull and sealed lips.

Hence, all was cloudy, and the veil of darkness seemed to defy all Nick Carter's power of penetration.

Matters were in this shape when the summons came from the chief of the department.

A brisk welcome greeted Nick, as usual.

"Busy, Mr. Carter, of course?" remarked the chief, interrogatively.

Nick bowed.

"And actively so?"

"On the contrary—passively."

"Important?"

"Most assuredly."

"Suppose you give me a few details?"

Nick did so; he recited the particulars of the two cases that were giving not only unsatisfactory results, but causing annoyance and anxiety.

Nick observed that the chief, while paying courteous attention, scarcely treat-

ed the matters with the average interest he ordinarily betrayed.

"Ah!" he commented, rather lightly—"all this will keep."

"What do you mean, chief?"

"The trial of Schwarz is not due for three weeks, and he cannot possibly secure bail."

"I have seen to that."

"Therefore, for nearly a month he is caged. Then why not let the matter simmer—in other words, develop itself?"

"That is not my system."

"No, you are not the kind of a man to trust to luck. Still, what better can you do? As the date of the trial comes nearer, the man's backers will make a move into renewed activity."

"I hope so."

"Then you have them."

Nick was silent.

"Now," resumed the official, "as to this Weare affair. The stake—one hundred thousand dollars—will be claimed by the real or the false Eva Romaine."

"One or the other—yes."

"The lawyer will advise you. You observe, Mr. Carter," easily ran on the chief, "that time is an essential here—the sole one. You will have to wait. You must let matters rest, and develop."

The chief's hand ran over some papers on the desk before him.

Nick's eyes naturally followed the movement, and they became glued on a card. The chief, noting the inspection, tried to hide it.

"So Chick has been here?" interrogated Nick.

"Why, yes; merely dropped in. What I would like to call your attention to," continued the chief, hurriedly, and in an embarrassed way, "is a matter down in Texas."

Nick did not look exactly gratified.

"What is it?" he inquired.

"Wholesale horse stealing."

"Where are the sheriffs?"

"The sufferers are asking that."

"Well?"

"I fancy we had better try and answer them. A gang is at work. Smash it up!"

"I?"

"Certainly."

Nick regarded the chief rather narrowly.

A horse stealing case in Texas was

rather a far-fetched affair for the New York police department.

Still, cases much farther away than that oftentimes had a direct connection with something metropolitan, and Nick waited for an explanation.

The chief gave none.

He simply handed a letter to Nick—a commonplace statement, and an appeal for expert talent.

"You see, Mr. Carter," said the chief, "you had better go straight down to Dallas."

"You think so."

"The writer of this letter will meet you there and give full particulars."

"How long need I be gone?"

"Perhaps a week."

"Very well."

"I can count on you?"

"I will try and arrange to be here for final instructions at 3:30."

The chief looked relieved. He took pains to shake Nick's hand in a very cordial fashion.

"What is he up to?"

This was Nick's personal query the minute he got outside of headquarters.

"He wants me out of the way," added the discerning expert. "The Texas case is a bagatelle—a mere pretence. What's brewing?"

Nick set his wits at work to find out. He had proceeded about a block, and was still grappling with the situation, when his keen eye flashed.

Intuitively Nick Carter knew whenever any one was following or watching him.

Some one was following Nick just now, and a discovery of the identity of the party caused Nick considerable astonishment.

At a distance and in a most cautious fashion, the detective's youngest assistant, Patsy, was on the trail.

There could not be the slightest doubt that the subordinate was shadowing his superior.

Nick went home. He smiled grimly as he found an explanation of the sudden disappearance of his trailer during the last square or two.

Patsy was writing in the detective's private consultation room, and he looked constrained as Nick proceeded to various closets letting off from what was familiarly designated as "the dressing room."

When these were visited it generally indicated a tour, a trail.

The detective went over his disguise paraphernalia pretty thoroughly.

He selected a few garments and a variety of wigs and false beards.

These he laid out upon a chair near an unfilled satchel, ready for immediate packing.

"Are you going away?" here asked Patsy.

"I have a call to Texas," explained Nick.

Patsy dropped his eyes half guiltily, although Nick was not looking at him.

The detective had passed to a wardrobe to secure a case of pigments and the like, another auxiliary to his disguise paraphernalia.

Nick found the case, but he paused to examine the other contents of the wardrobe.

The detective kept everything in that line in order—knew to a golf cap the exact position of every article the receptacle contained.

"Something missing," soliloquized Nick.

Quite casually, however, he turned to Patsy.

"Where is Chick?" he inquired.

"Why, Chick?" stumbled Patsy—"oh! he has left the city, I believe."

"Since when?"

"He came in some hours ago. Said he wished to follow up an outside clew on the Schwarz case."

"Did he?" murmured Nick.

"It might take him a day, perhaps two days."

"So—he fitted out?"

"Why, yes," assented Patsy—"I believe he went fixed for the occasion."

"It seems so," commented Nick.

"He left word that he would take care of affairs in general, so you need not worry or hurry."

"Worry—about what?"

"The Schwarz case."

"And hurry—where and how?"

Patsy was flurried.

"When you were away," he said, lamely.

"Away where?"

"Texas."

"Oh! so Chick knew I was going to Texas?"

Patsy looked extremely disturbed.

"He said so, yes."

"How did he find out?"

"Really, I don't know."

"Something brewing—more certainly than ever!" soliloquized Nick. "My own kith and kin playing me! Now, what is up here?"

Nick did not stop to pack up his satchel. He left the house and proceeded to the main office of a telegraph company.

Nick was known, and he got what he wanted—an instrument exclusively to himself.

He called Dallas, and he got Dallas.

The detective's well-trained features underwent a variety of significant changes during the succeeding two hours.

When he left the telegraph office, he had got the "particulars" of which the chief of the service had been so chary.

Nick started for headquarters forthwith—a gleam of determination in his eyes.

Nick had not gone a square, when he cast a sidelong glance down the street he was crossing.

The detective was being shadowed anew—but not by Patsy this time.

CHAPTER VIII.

"NICK CARTER'S DEATH-WARRANT."

Nick had discovered Ida, his little lady detective, on his trail.

There was a serious end to the affair, he at once discerned.

Nick was not exactly being shadowed—but guarded.

There could be no other explanation to the unprecedented actions of his professional associates.

Patsy had lurked outside of Police Headquarters, and had kept Nick company at a safe distance nearly to his home.

Ida must have slipped into his place as Nick started for the telegraph office.

Awaiting his coming from thence, she had patiently watched the building for over two hours.

Ida followed Nick clear to Police Headquarters.

Then she mysteriously disappeared, but Nick did not doubt had slipped to temporary hiding, to resume the trail when he reappeared.

Nick somewhat surprised the chief of the service as he entered his presence, by closing and locking the door so as to prevent intrusion.

"Ready?" insinuated the official, with an equivocal smile.

"I went home to get ready," answered Nick.

"Good! there is the 5:21 train; let me telephone for sleeping accommodation for you."

"Don't trouble, chief," dissented Nick.

"Eh?"

"If I go, I shall not care to sleep."

"Why——"

"No," pursued Nick, smoothly—"I shall occupy my time striving to guess out the meaning of a few peculiar discoveries I have made."

"Discoveries?" repeated the chief—and he looked uncomfortable. "May I ask what they are?"

"Surely, for you may be able to explain them."

"How is that?"

"Well, when I went home I learned that my assistant——"

"Chick?"

"That Chick knew I was going to Texas before I even knew it myself."

"Why—ah—yes!" stammered the chief. "You see, he was here a short time before you first came."

"I believe you mentioned that."

"Certainly—do you not remember?"

"After I had found it out, though."

"Oh!"

"I further found, chief, that Chick had gone off on a two days' absence."

"Struck some new clew, perhaps."

"He must have done so. But here is the queerest part of the affair!"

The chief looked expectant—disquieted, as well, however.

"Chick had taken with him a disguise that I cannot account for."

"What disguise was that, Mr. Carter?" inquired the chief.

"One in which, on a previous occasion, he made up to represent myself."

"Indeed?" commented the official, looking crestfallen.

"Rather singular, that, chief?"

"Of course Chick has some purpose in view——"

"In personating myself?"

"Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Nick. "So, let us pass that. For here is another extraordinary double occurrence. I was shadowed from headquarters home when I left here—I was shadowed back from home as I returned here."

"By——"

"My own assistants, Patsy, Ida."

"Shadowed?"

"Let me correct that—guarded would be the better term."

"Guarded?" murmured the chief. "Why?"

"You answer that!"

The chief met the thrust direct with a forced bluff.

"Mr. Carter, you fancied all this!"

Nick smiled indulgently.

"Am I given to fancies?" he sharply inquired.

"Well, no—you are guided by facts, usually."

"Here are some additional facts, then—I wanted to know my ground down in Texas there."

"Eh? Ha! yes—just so. Naturally."

The chief turned all colors—Nick was suave, but definite.

"In quest of facts, I got in touch with Dallas."

"Mr. Carter, you are—indomitable!"

"Let us proceed," went on Nick, deliberately, "and perhaps some other word will fit better. I wanted those particulars you were so chary about."

"Particulars?"

"Concerning the great horse-stealing case."

"How do they pan out?"

"They don't pan out at all."

"They don't?"

"No. It is just the slow, unimportant kind of an affair that you might put a new man on or a cheap one, to break him in—nothing better."

"Mr. Carter, you have floored us, I see!"

The chief threw up his hands—this was clear confession.

"Now," said Nick, "I don't go to Texas?"

"Well—no."

"And what have you been playing me for?"

"Oh! Mr. Carter."

"Why has Chick assumed my identity?"

The chief did not say.

"Why is it necessary to guard me on the public street like the Czar of Russia fearing a bomb?"

"You want to know that?"

"I must know that."

"Very well, then—there is a bomb, veritable and menacing, to guard against."

"Meant for me?"

"Yes. And my effort to get you out of the way, the actions of your assistants, are one and all influenced by our deep consideration and solicitude for your welfare."

"Thanks, but——"

"I know what you are going to say."

"Indeed?"

"That you can take care of yourself."

"You express it finely, chief!"

The official had been growing steadily more and more serious—he shook his head now in a grave way.

"Not in the present instance, Mr. Carter!" he asserted.

"I am threatened?"

"Worse than that!"

"Well—explain."

"A price is set on your head!"

Nick took it rather coolly.

"A price on my head, eh?" he repeated.

"Ten thousand dollars!"

"So much as that!"

"They fear you—that is sure."

"I am to be put out of the way?"

"'Dead or alive' the reward offer reads!"

"There is one, then?"

"There may be a thousand scattered broadcast, for all we know!"

"Could I see a sample?"

"You can."

Nick calmly took up the sheet of paper that the chief tendered; the hand of the official was unsteady.

"They value me highly, it seems!" deliberately remarked Nick.

"Mr. Carter," said the chief of the secret service with emotion and solemnity, "do not jest on this serious matter! That offer of reward is certainly your death warrant!"

CHAPTER IX.

DANGER!

The document that the chief had handed to Nick Carter comprised half a sheet of manifold paper.

It was one of numerous copies, Nick discerned; it was brief and to the point.

"A bid for bloodshed or kidnapping," observed the detective.

"Do you see the signature?"

"That snake-like scrawl."

"You understand?"

"I think I do," answered Nick, studiously scanning the signature in question.

"It was notorious—ten years back."

"And even later than that."

"In derision, a skilled burglar often left it scrawled on desks, vault doors, or the walls, where he operated."

"I recall that brief spell of mysterious pillage."

"The man was never caught."

"He retired wealthy."

"Where to?"

"England, they said."

"He is in America now, it appears!"

"How did you come by this paper?"

"We found it on the floor of a den raided yesterday evening by the police."

"And then you apprised my assistant?"

"I sent for Chick, yes."

"And put up this play to get me out of the way?" challenged Nick.

"Why not? We can hardly afford to have you completely out of the way, Mr. Carter!"

"And Chick?" questioned Nick.

"What about him?"

"You advised——"

"Nothing, save the best measures for protecting you."

"You were not aware that he intended making of himself the target, while I was safe in another section of the country?"

"A target!"

"Certainly; has he not made up to meet my own personality?"

"But his motive——"

"Sacrifice, if need be—a risk I cannot allow him to undertake!" declared Nick, firmly.

The chief looked quite grave—there was occasion.

He had not anticipated Chick's move, now so apparent in its heroic motive.

"I presume," said Nick, as he started towards the door, "that this fellow who travels on a sign manual rather than a name, must be known to the general criminal community of the city?"

"Well known, of course."

"So that his bid is understood as being genuine, and the cash ready."

"It must be that way."

"Certainly the man has a motive," pursued Nick, "and I surmise that that motive is connected with Schwarz."

This announcement caused the chief to look distressed.

"Just one more question," said Nick, his hand on the lock of the door. "In what especial den was that reward paper found?"

The official told, and Nick memorized.

"Wait!" exclaimed the chief, deeply aroused at Nick's prompt, brisk proceedings, announcing a final departure.

"Well, chief?"

"You are going——"

"To find Chick."

"Where?"

"I shall strike the trail somehow," answered the detective, confidently; "if it does not come to meet me, I shall proceed to search for it."

"It is vague—a blind hunt!"

Nick proceeded from headquarters. He was worked up considerably over Chick's "defection."

He knew his fearless assistant like a book; it was precisely like the ardent young professional to strive to draw the enemy's fire, failing any better way to force them to discover themselves.

Nick paused on the pavement outside to cast a brief glance around in quest of Ida. He soon discovered her.

Only keen, practiced eyes like his own could have discerned and recognized an unobtrusive figure hovering in a shadowy hallway.

Nick took out his handkerchief. He smiled to himself as he fancied the surprise of his charming little associate at recognizing a distinct direction to approach.

When they met, Nick told her that he was fully apprised of the situation so far as it concerned his probable peril.

"I will take care of myself," he assured Ida, who looked anxious.

"But there is danger everywhere!"

"Chick is sharing it?" pertinently suggested Nick.

"Ah, yes—Chick!"

"Between us we may divide and weaken the intentions of the enemy. Besides, for the time being I am going nowhere in particular."

Ida looked her full concern.

"And this reward offer," the detective resumed, "may be a fake, a scare—pure and simple."

Nick, having assured himself that Ida was really headed homewards, recalled the raided point of the previous evening where the reward document had been found on the floor.

He lost no time in visiting the police station whence the descent had been organized.

The officer in charge soon told the detective all that he knew.

A drinking den and dancing hall had been complained of by neighboring shopkeepers.

When raided, a motley crowd of men and women had been found.

They were taken to the police station, a small fine was imposed, and the license of the haunt was revoked.

At just about dusk Nick worked around to the vicinity of the place.

He anticipated no great results from a survey close at hand—still, he made it thorough.

The neighborhood was a hard one. After satisfying himself that it would scarcely pay to spend the evening in the various surrounding haunts on the slender hope of happening upon some suspicious crook, Nick turned down a narrow street in the direction of the heart of the city.

He was planning some broad drag-net explorations, with the assistance of Patsy, Ida and one or two picked department men, when, passing under an electric arc light it sprang into flame.

The whole street was at once ablaze, the lighting hour having arrived, and just then Nick was focussed in refulgent view.

He put up his hand to slightly shade his face with his hat, for the neighborhood was not to his fancy.

His hand experienced a searing contact—there passed through his hat a bullet.

"A close shave," muttered Nick, "and—it tells!"

He could not trace the report; the shot, he calculated, had been fired from a second-story window.

Immediately Nick turned into a diverging street. The shot had apprised him that his life was no longer safe in New York.

Out of range, Nick ransacked a pocket to see if he carried with him sufficient material to put up a presentable disguise, if only a facial one.

This was not so, and he started on briskly. However, the shot impelled him to decide upon an early return to this shady vicinity well prepared for action.

Almost immediately came a second token of disturbance.

Nick heard a woman scream. She came out of a doorway, or rather gateway, leading between two buildings.

As she darted down the street, there appeared in pursuit a policeman in full uniform.

He shouted at her. She half paused, turned, lifted a watch and chain she held in her grasp, and flung it full in the officer's face.

This somewhat unsteadied the policeman. He lost time picking up the jewelry—then he resumed the chase.

Nick had halted. The professional impulse was to stay the runner and aid justice.

As the woman's face came into clear view, however, Nick, with somewhat of a stare, became passive, simply watching.

He was prepared to follow, when to his surprise the woman ran almost directly to the spot where he was.

She brushed by him, passing without observing him. Instantly she stooped.

It was to attempt to seize and lift one side of the heavy grating protection to a store area.

As she failed, Nick decided on his course. He stooped, and with one hand drew up the heavy grating.

"Courage!" he said.

"Oh—thanks!"

At that moment the policeman came rushing up.

Nick was in shadow—the spot was in deep gloom. Besides, Nick was not acquainted with the officer.

"Shut him out—we can!" came an audible whisper from a point six steps down past the grating.

That request seemed inviting. At all hazards, Nick was resolved to make his play to remain with the woman.

He turned upon the officer as the latter plunged toward him and the grating.

Nick delivered a deft and stinging blow—though it was not intended to prove serious.

The officer reeled back, stumbled and measured his length on the sidewalk.

Nick sprang down the steps, letting the grating fall.

"Good! We are safe!" was breathed in his ear.

A white, shapely hand reached past Nick, and instantly it snapped a padlock around the connecting gratings.

Then its owner uttered a slightly scornful, triumphant laugh.

"I lost the booty," she observed, "but I slipped the policeman. You did splendid!"

The woman heedlessly confessed her status; Nick was a trifle surprised at this.

He had assisted her to escape, and he had knocked an officer down, for a very cogent reason.

In the fugitive Nick Carter had recognized one of the two visitors to Lawyer Keene's office, who had both answered to the name of Miss Eva Romaine.

This one—positively and unmistakably—was the brunette.

CHAPTER X.

IN DISGUISE.

In the semi-gloom, the same dashing, daring siren eyes that Nick had noticed when boxed in at the lawyer's office, he noticed now.

The woman was gloating over her triumph—she looked up through the grating as though disposed to take a risk for the privilege of witnessing the police officer's discomfiture.

Nick kept out of range of all light.

The furious officer, having arisen, came to the grating, drawing his revolver.

The girl allowed Nick to lead her out of range, though the policeman did not fire.

She laughed back at him derisively. The officer tugged at the grating, calling for help.

"You are not safe here," suggested Nick.

"Oh, yes!"

"You are sure of that?"

"Why, certainly! Again—you did splendid!"

She tried to make out what her champion looked like, but the light did not suffice.

"Just follow me," she advised.

"You seem to know where you are," remarked Nick.

"Perfectly. Hurry, now."

"Going to take care of me also?" suggested Nick.

"You may rely on me."

"I need to be taken care of."

"Do you, really?"

"Yes—really."

There was no banter in Nick's voice; he spoke as if thoroughly in earnest.

The grating padlock had now been broken or forced, for they heard some one drop to the steps they had recently left.

Nick's conductress darted along a passageway leading under the house, then into a basement and up a flight of steps, where she pushed up a slanting door.

Nick found himself in a hallway on the street level. The girl went to its end and knocked. There was no response and she whistled, clear and shrill as a man's whistle.

"I am getting on!" she remarked, as though all this were a frolic, and she was enjoying it immensely.

"How is that?" questioned Nick.

"These people will aid us."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know them particularly."

"You don't know them?"

"But they know me at least, who I come from."

"And who is that?"

"Ah! that is telling."

"I am not curious to know."

"Here he is—come, quick!"

A wicket in a door dropped. Through a square hole appeared a broad ray of light.

Nick kept out of its range. A man's face appeared at the other side of the hole.

"Who is it?" challenged a gruff voice.

"It is I," said the girl, boldly.

"Oh—who are you?"

The girl simply put up her hand. Instantly the voice beyond spoke:

"All right."

When the door opened, Nick looked in upon a curious apartment.

It was littered with dresses, suits of clothes, wigs, rows of false heads, mustaches—even cardboard strips holding all kinds of eyebrows.

Nick took the place for an emporium where masquerade outfits were kept for hire.

The woman passed in hurriedly, and pulled Nick after her.

"Hold on! what's the hurry?" demanded her host.

"I didn't come from the street—and there is the hurry!"

"And who is this?"

"A friend. Let us pass, if you don't want the police down on you!"

This hastened the man's movements.

Nick passed through.

He instantly drew back into a maze of costumes hanging from wall hooks.

The woman had gone on a few steps. Not yet had she seen Nick's face—nor had the man who had admitted them. Nick decided that neither should.

He gave them just one glance—then the detective attended strictly to business.

That glance stimulated Nick marvelously—it revealed the magic power of the brunette's shapely hand.

Turned palm inwards was the setting of a great seal ring.

It faced Nick this time—its monogram, its sign manual, showed clearly.

It was a counterpart of the signature to the "death warrant"—the reward offer of ten thousand dollars "for Nick Carter, dead or alive!"

The detective had struck the trail!

Even if it had not come in this way—even though this woman had not borne the remotest hint of a connection with the mysterious seeker after his life, Nick would have been satisfied.

Because, above all else, she was one of the principal actors in the Weare imposture.

Nick heard all that was said between the two, a few feet beyond him.

The woman explained that, close driven, she had been forced to take a secret way to a place of refuge of which—and of many such, in fact—she had been advised.

Her credentials were all right. Then to fit her out, with a clever disguise!

"But about that man?" suggested her companion, turning to see what had become of Nick.

"He's all right—I vouch for him."

"On your own confession, you don't know him?"

"I know his acts—he saved me, and he 'did' the policeman."

"All right. What is this? You're cool!"

Nick had coolly helped himself to a disguise; the materials for half a hundred lay in reach.

The man recognized his own goods—he scowled.

"Isn't it all right?" questioned Nick, deliberately.

He addressed the woman.

She nodded vivaciously.

"You're shady, too—are you?" she smiled.

"More so than ever, since I laid that policeman out!"

"Oh, yes—you're shady, that's clear."

The woman moved among the disguise paraphernalia and picked out what she wanted.

As she advanced towards a dark room, she turned to say to Nick:

"You wait for me."

"Of course."

"I want to talk to you—I fancy you're the right sort."

She came back as much changed from her recent appearance as was Nick himself from his recent personality.

"Will I pass?" she inquired of the old man.

"You will pass."

"Now—one question."

"Go ahead?"

"I was sent here to find some one—Purnell."

Nick took in that familiar name for all it signified.

"Can't you find him?"

"No, and he is wanted badly."

"By?"

The woman again lifted the ring.

"You see, I came to hunt him up," she went on. "I got all the points, like this place here, but it's strange to an outsider. I took a flyer on my own hook in a place over yonder."

"What?"

"A watch and chain temptingly close, on a young fellow with more money than brains."

"Shall I try and hunt up Purnell for you?"

"Will you?"

"For the man who sent you—certainly!"

"Then you are to tell him that he is wanted, and I will go back."

"Just as well."

"Give him a message, first."

The woman lowered her tones here, but Nick overheard.

"What is your message?"

"Tell him to call off."

"On what?"

"The reward."

"Oh! that—some one has won it?"

"Some one has won it. Tell Purnell that we have got Nick Carter!"

CHAPTER XI.

BROUGHT TO TIME.

Murder was in the air—wholesale, heartless.

Never had Nick been in an atmosphere of crime so sinister, so sanguinary.

When the brunette delivered the message, "We have got Nick Carter!" he, who knew otherwise, surmised what had transpired.

When the brunette left the disguise den, Nick accompanied her.

He had won both her confidence and her gratitude.

"You did me a good turn," she declared. "We are safe to go where we like, disguised."

"Yes," assented Nick.

"In the absence of a man I was sent for, you might fit in."

"Work?"

"Paying work."

"A long task?"

"A short one."

"Would I do?"

"I will recommend you."

"I'm agreeable."

So, it became plain sailing for Nick Carter.

The trail, its motives, the numerous ramifications of a gigantic plot—had drifted into his hands.

But only because the skilled expert had set the wires aright at the beginning.

Of course the man who had sent the brunette to the city was Merckle.

Back to Merckle she took Nick—up beyond Harlem, to a sparsely settled neighborhood, where the ex-criminal king had played the honest burgher until ties of kindred and the lure of money had induced him to make the last cast of the die.

Nick was admitted by the brunette to a solid-looking house.

As he was led to a room where he was bidden to remain, through the half open door of another he got a view of a man he took to be the originator of the serpent coil signature.

In still another room Nick observed a girl he had seen before.

It was the second of the female impostors—the blonde, this time.

Inside of half an hour Nick knew what he had been brought to the place to do.

The brunette re-appeared, and to him she handed a knife in a sheath.

"Are you nervy?" she asked, fixing those bold, wicked eyes of hers upon the detective.

Nick knew what was coming—he was to be hired to do what Purnell had not shown up to do.

He was to "kill Nick Carter!"

This was Chick, of course. Nick was "willing;" he wished to reach Chick.

So, after some persuasion, he lent himself to the plan enthusiastically.

He agreed to put a troublesome enemy of "a certain party" out of the way for a money consideration.

The woman led Nick to a dark cellar. She unlocked a door.

"In there," she said—"make no miss!"

"Too much at stake!" assured cold-blooded Nick Carter.

The detective found Chick as he had expected to find him—gagged, helpless, awaiting the assassin's blade.

Chick did not know how he had been brought hither; his downfall, posing as Nick Carter, had come in a criminal den he had invaded.

While drugged, he had been transported to the man who had offered the ten thousand dollars reward.

"And now we have the whole combi-

nation," Chick observed, as calmly as though he had not just grazed a terrible fate.

Chick had overheard some talk an hour previous; it concerned a girl, a prisoner, in the attic.

There was a discussion, and the two detectives cautiously left the cellar.

It was apportioned to Chick to keep a secret eye on the blonde, the brunette and Merckle.

Nick penetrated to the upper part of the house. He tried many doors; one he finally reached that was locked.

Nick applied his eye to the keyhole; quite an animated scene met his gaze.

"The right room," instantly decided the detective.

There could be no doubt of that, for at an open window leading upon a sharply slanting roof, a pale-faced, frightened-looking girl was stealthily stepping.

Nick, it seemed, had arrived at a moment of attempted escape.

He spoke softly; the girl did not heed him. Then she passed out of view.

Dropping all care or caution, Nick put his broad shoulder to the door.

It gave in with more of a crack than a crash.

Nick was fairly appalled as he neared the open window.

The girl had mistaken her bearings and overestimated her ability; she was just toppling towards the edge of the roof.

A plunge to the street far below seemed inevitable, when Nick made a masterly leap.

The detective's quick arm shot out towards the terrified girl.

It was a narrow chance; in time, but just in time, the detective saved that imperiled life.

She fainted as he brought her within the room and placed her on a couch.

He went down the stairs on tiptoe; abruptly he changed that cautious progress to a series of bounds.

Two pistol shots rang out—a woman's scream followed.

There was the sound of shattering glass, as Nick got to the ground floor.

Cowering in a corner were two women—blonde and brunette.

A shattered window showed.

"Follow!" said Chick, briefly, and Nick understood; the director of schemes,

the man who had planned his doom, had escaped.

Nick was outside in a hurry, but the fugitive had got away.

When the detective came back into the house, he found a peculiar state of affairs.

At first he fancied that the materialization of "two Nick Carters" had thrown the blonde and brunette into a condition of hysterical shock.

This was not true. An investigation brought out some startling facts.

These women had been poisoned—and it required the services of two hard-working physicians several hours to save their lives.

It seemed that the arch-schemer they had trusted had played them doubly false.

Believing Nick Carter done for, he had aimed to silence these two confederates.

Possibly he intended to remove the captive up stairs, fire the house, and carry out his schemes—with no complicating attachments.

What those intentions were, Nick and Chick partly knew by midnight.

The girl up stairs restored to consciousness, was soon able to talk.

Her story was clear, simple convincing—she was the real Eva Romaine.

The brunette was a Southern adventuress; the blonde was an ex-variety performer.

Both of these persons had met Miss Romaine at a town in Texas, where she was nursing the Mexican woman, who was then very ill.

Both had become aware of the history and the secret of the young heiress.

It was a remarkable coincidence, but each had struck the same scheme without being aware of the other's participation in it.

As fate would have it, they had appeared at Lawyer Keene's with their forged credentials on the same day.

They had left the girl, Eva, apparently engaged for at least a week in restoring her nurse to health. Therefore, there was plenty of time to operate in.

On that day when they had last appeared at Lawyer Keene's office, the false clerk, watching the Schwarz case, had got onto and discovered their double imposture.

He had communicated with them—had shown them that they had not only spoiled

their case, but stood in danger of arrest if they re-appeared.

He told them of his patron—Merckle. When Paquita appeared, the villain had not hesitated to put her out of the way.

Advised of the Mexican woman's appearance, the brunette knew enough about Miss Romaine's intentions to get on her trail.

She was found and carried to the home of the avaricious Merckle just as she was preparing to join Paquita at the lawyer's office.

The ensuing day all the tangle was straightened out, Paquita removed from the hospital to Miss Romaine's care, and an expert surgeon engaged.

It was not until two days afterwards, however, that the case was practically wound up.

Chick had run down Purnell, and he was jailed—but Merckle evaded the detectives.

They ascertained that he was planning to flee the country.

They traced him to the crook's disguiser, and there lost the clew; then, one evening, Nick Carter found it.

Nick found it because he had learned at last the identity that Merckle had assumed—it was that of the typical Hebrew peddler.

The last act in the famous jury-fixing case ended three hours later.

The disguised Merckle—awaiting the sailing of a tramp steamer—Nick found in the wretched room of a low hovel.

Here on a table was a satchel full to bursting with his ill-gotten wealth, and two revolvers lying beside it. Merckle dozed before a smouldering fire.

The door of the room was a wreck, but bolted on the inside.

The refugee was not aware that a human hand reached noiselessly through the broken panel.

As Nick caught up the two weapons, the ferret nature of the greatest criminal New York had ever known roused instinctively.

There was a shout, a grapple, a struggle—brief, one-sided, decisive.

The man who thought he had put the famous detective in a hole by offering a reward of ten thousand dollars "for Nick Carter, dead or alive!" that night slept

in a cell with his rascally colleague, Schwarz, the firebug.

Nick Carter had foiled a plan to catch him, and scored a brilliant professional success all around.

[THE END.]

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